

When Nature Misbehaves Humans Have To Weep

- Viewed from a Buddhist perspective

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The recent devastating happenings in the South Eastern sector of Asia through the giant tidal wave, encompassing a global mixture of humans, have prompted us to express our opinion as Buddhists on this subject. By now everybody knows it by its posthumously awarded name tsunami. We shall refer to it hereafter by that name. When Nature Misbehaves, as we have expressed above in our title, and it affects the lives of humans who inhabit this earth, anywhere and everywhere, irrespective of caste and creed, religion and ethnicity, we Humans Have To Weep. Thanks to scientific research of today, enough is known by us now as to how and why these happen.

Equal thanks to the diverse forms of media at our disposal in the world, this knowledge is made available to man in every nook and corner. And that, to be sensibly used all the time for the benefit of man, for his security and his well-being. But apparently this disaster could not have been averted. Nature, with no enigmatic slowness whatsoever, has moved much faster than man. Where and when shall man succeed and where shall he fail? That is the question which we never ask ourselves. Better we discover in advance our own limits, every one of us, whether in the east or the west, in the north or the south, no matter what creeds we profess, and ethnically or politically where we belong, and work within those perimeters prescribed for each one of us.

Penalty or Punishment / Who Punishes Whom?

Even in the pre-scientific age of the world, these very natural things like earth quakes and volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, and devastating floods [not forgetting Noah's ark and the great flood], did take place. Man on earth here explained them in his own simple way, elevating these phenomena at times to the level of

divine activities or heavenly forces. Thunder and lightning were looked upon by ancient Indians of the Vedic age [i.e. thousands of years ante-dating the time of the Buddha], as the assigned functions of the Rain God Parjanya. It was incumbent on him to strike dead the evil-doers of the land with strokes of thunder and lightning. The Ṛgveda is very specific on this when it says 'Parjanya, with his thunder and lightning, strikes dead the evil doers' [*Parjanyaḥ stanayan hanti duṣkṛtaḥ*].

The God of Waters, Varuṇa, was equally dreaded. He could be vicious not only in the external world, with violent movements of water, but could also equally well punish the sinner, filling his inside with water and rolling him into his grave as a victim of the then much dreaded disease *Ascitis* [colloquially referred to as dropsy]. Man who had not yet discovered his identity and his own inner strength, knelt down in prayer for his security.

Elsewhere, such elemental violence or misbehavior like hailstorms, directly descending from the skies, were explained as expressions of divine wrath or heaven's vengeance on man for his sinful behavior on earth. They were looked upon as acts of punishment sent down from above, to which man had to helplessly succumb.

Whatever be the explanation man on earth gives to these phenomena which the ancients reckoned as heaven-sent, they are known to everyone today as recurrent events in the world we live, taking place right across the globe with fair regularity, whether they be in California, Afghanistan or Japan. The nature of the universe being what it is, Buddhists look upon them as natural events, coming under the category of ***order of nature*** or ***utu-niyāma***. They are as regular as the germination of seeds under favorable conditions. Buddhists call this latter, the ***order of seeds*** or ***bīja-niyāma***.

When these calamitous events take place, they take toll of life, of man, and bird and beast without any discrimination. Destruction comes to every one and everything in their wake. There is hardly any conceivable judgement of guilt or

innocence falling upon on any one, within this pale of disaster or out side of it. We, as Buddhists, fail to see any sense in making moral issues out of these.

Nevertheless, in situations like these, everyone of us who has survived, and who in his or her own area of life activity, has committed any crime against one's fellow beings through neglect or by calculation, should now invariably feel within oneself, a deep sense of moral guilt. Our solemn prayer indeed is that this should happen so globally, no matter what one's religious creed or ethnic identity be. Or in which part of the world one lives.

To every one of us, this recent incident provides a real chance in this very life, for self-correction and self-redemption, through the admission of our own crimes of omission and commission. This principle should apply globally to everyone, if only we look at ourselves with honesty and a true spirit of benevolence, without any tinge of arrogance whatsoever.

For those of us who have suffered in this disaster, not necessarily physically, if we did really suffer at all during this crisis, a day of judgement has come. It is not to be missed. This, we deliver as a message to mankind. This new thinking and this change of attitude which we now sponsor will undeniably be contributory in a big way to the re-building of a ravaged community anywhere in this disaster-stricken sector. Much more than bag-fulls of gold, delivered with or without strings. This alone will restore peace on earth and goodwill among men.

Think of what has happened. We need to be adequately alerted to our real position in the world we live. We shall not look upon ourselves in isolation, merely as privileged persons down here on earth, with direct links with heavens above, no matter in which particular region, to which we need to continue pledging submission and support for all favors received to streamline our life here. On the contrary, we humans have to be alive to our relationship to a cosmic totality of far greater dimension, within our visibility. This is the idea of a Biophilia Hypothesis. We have to be conscious of the ecosystems to which we are linked.

A little bit of religious awareness

In a perilous world like this where death can be more certain than life, Buddhists are required to live in such a way that all life around us may live in comfort and security. For who knows whether death would come to us tomorrow [= *Ko jaññā maraṇaṃ suve*]. Everyone must maximize the benefits of living of the other and for the other. The Buddhist spirit is embodied in the words *Sukhino vā khemino hontu sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*: 'May all beings be happy and comfortable. May their lives be safe and secure.' This has to be more than a mere prayer on somebody's lips. This is essentially a charter for the humans for healthy and harmonious living in a civilized world.

Buddhists shall not destroy the life of any living thing. They shall not cause others to do so. Nor shall they endorse or approve any form of killing done by others. Every silent acceptance of such activity, through fear or favor, is one of inestimable shame on mankind. Compassion has to be the ultimate ethic of humans for their own survival. It is this line of thinking, undoubtedly, that prompted the good lady Victoria Moran to produce her delightful book entitled *COMPASSION, THE ULTIMATE ETHIC*.

Post-tsunami restoration and repair

And now for restoration of order in a post-disaster world. Here we wish to speak specifically about Sri Lanka, no more and no less. Loss of life here is believed to be in the very high region of 50,000, more or less. Widely distributed damage to property is inestimable. Rehabilitation of the terror-stricken survivors who had lived on the coastal fringe is going to be more than problematic. They all have to be attended to.

It is known to every one that very generous assistance is coming to us in a big way from every corner of the earth. But it has to be remembered by all donors, both great and small, and whatever be their identity, that this is not a venture to build something out of nothing. It certainly cannot be like building something anew on barren desert sand. Up to the time of the tsunami disaster,

Sri Lankans have had a variegated past, with many items of traditional culture. These cannot be swept away by a tidal wave. People cannot be torn apart from their moorings. In times of crisis like this, when people have to be re-established, this is a vital principle to be remembered.

All aid flowing into the country at the moment has to be a sincere attempt to assist in the restoration of a culture and a life style of a people with a datable history going back more than two thousand years. In this little island of Sri Lanka, from north to south as well as from east to west, the culture and civilization of Buddhism, brought hither more than two millennia ago, had left megalithic monuments to last much longer than even the recently devastated giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan.

History is more than adequately proving that man, in his ethno-religious fanaticism and fury has been, always and everywhere, a more devilish architect of destruction, than the wildness of nature. Infuriated humans are seen to be determined to exterminate the culture of every other group which is imagined and identified in moments of insanity to be their rival. In Sri Lanka there is adequate proof of this. It is no exaggeration if we report that in our own country, this kind of vandalism continues to be done every day, under the very nose of people who are pledged to protect them. Exquisite sculptures in stone, massive architectural masterpieces like the brazen palace and monumental trees like the Bodhi [*ficus religiosa*], which have a right to survive even to this day, have given way under these ruthless assaults. For a nation, with a legitimate pride of its past, this is obliteration enough.

Now in the wake of this tragic disaster which in a way is global and with an equally global sensitivity and concern within us to restore peace and prosperity, it makes absolutely true sense to scrutinize the sanity with which we are living in this world, and are attempting to teach others while there is a great need for each one of us to learn a little more. We shall here focus attention more on our Sri Lankan scene.

An invariable clean up before repair and restoration

It is also true that this disaster has come about at a time while a post-independence Sri Lanka is being put in a melting pot by generation after generation of bungling political leadership for the preparation of a witches' brew. For several decades now Sri Lanka has witnessed a politically-tied-up ethno-religious conflict which has been meaninglessly exaggerated globally by numerous interested groups, both from within and outside. There is no gainsaying that too much of international politics also has seeped into it.

On the other hand, it is also equally true that there are many saner and wiser men and women in both these groups who know and believe in the possibility of peaceful co-existence in this heaven-blessed island. Some of us are old enough, well past our eighties, to tell you what Sri Lanka was like on the dawn of the twentieth century. What respect we had for humans, as men and women with wisdom, glistening with human virtues which were very nearly divine. Believe me. They came from all ethnic groups of the time. Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay, Borah and Sinhala. Also among them were Hindus, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Buddhists and followers of the Islamic faith. I can name them for you, one by one.

For a peaceful settlement of this self-annihilating conflict in Sri Lanka, dignified detachment at every level of thinking and acting is a primary prerequisite. Honesty and trustworthiness have to be part and parcel of every pursuit of a peaceful solution to this problem, no matter from which part of the world these mediators are seen surfacing from time to time. Excessive and aggressive greed of groups who are politically motivated on any side have to be rooted out and exiled for all times.

An honest scrutiny of Sri Lankan history would clearly indicate how the major community in the island, i.e. the Sinhala Buddhists who constitute nearly 70 % of the island's population have very peacefully assimilated and accumulated over the centuries, nay millennia, a great deal of Hindu religion and culture of their

neighbors into their own. Who in this country accommodates Skanda, a ferocious God of War, with weapons of mass destruction in his hands, within their own pantheon, even offering him the option to aspire for Buddha-hood one day. They even concede to him the title Future Buddha: Matu Buduvana Kanda Kumaru. It is the Sri Lankan Buddhists. Japanese Buddhists did identically the same in accommodating Hachiman, the Shinto God of War as a Bodhisattva under the name Hachiman Pusa.

A wider vision in the process of rehabilitation

One final consideration with regard to the rebuilding of the devastated areas of Sri Lanka. Most of the damaged areas are known to have been semi-urban and rural. In a hasty program of re-building one must not make the mistake of over-urbanizing these settlements. The village-community life pattern must be restored and preserved.

Rural communities must be encouraged to rear dairy cattle. The water buffalo must be re-introduced to the midst of these village communities, particularly in view of the resulting inestimably rich curd which comes in its wake. The widely prevalent use of imported milk powders has also robbed us of the once usefully utilized cattle manure for our home gardening. Do we now have to set up new ministries to import cow-dung from our powdered milk suppliers abroad? Does it not make sense to have some cows with us? Imported milk both for the babies and the adults! Planners beware. Increasing incidents of breast cancer at an alarming rate may be only one red light. Tsunami should awake np us to correct ourselves in the process of rehabilitation.

Adequate attention for the re-establishment of village communities is a priority that must get into the heads of planners. Social elitism, in any case, must have its roots in the village. Village is by no means rustic. In the rural setting of the village, man lives closest to nature, in proximity with bird and beast. This is where man can learn most of his lessons about life.

Close to such settlements, urban as well as rural, and scattered among

them, there should be provision for miniature tracts of man-grown forests for the accommodation of birds and animals. Such forests were known in India during the time of the Buddha and were referred to as *ropita-vana*. The city of Rājagṛha is said to have had such man-grown forests in addition to what was linked with the Himalayan forest range.

Even in modern times, we have been through such beautiful spots in European countries where they are referred to as *bois* and *foret*, such as Bois de Boulogne in the vicinity of Paris. Then and only then, with such friendship between man and nature, can there be the growth of a healthy human community, with a delightful sense of love, share and care for everybody, the men, women and children, and the young and the old, as well as man and bird and beast.